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Speaking of Learning: The Promises and Pitfalls of Bilingual Education

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Speaking of Learning: The Promises and Pitfalls of Bilingual Education

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Dedication

Dedicated to my parents Armando and Maria Luisa Morales, the hardest workers I know.

Abstract

Speaking of Learning: The Promises and Pitfalls of Bilingual Education

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The state of Texas is undoubtedly undergoing a demographic shift. Since 2001, Hispanics have made up the largest ethnic representation in Texas public schools and by 2020 they're estimated to become a majority minority throughout the state.

As their population swells, so will the number of English language learners (Ells) in Texas schools. In fact, this group has grown by nearly 40 percent in the last ten years. During this same period of time, English learners have remained, on average, four times more likely to drop out compared to their White counterparts. This is forcing educators and administrators in the state to readjust their approach to educating English learners. The models used have been both ardently supported by educators and vehemently opposed.

Recently, a program called dual language, which uses both native-language and English-based instruction has risen into prominence among educators. But many have been left wondering if this program will be the answer to disparities between English learners and monolingual students.

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Dual Language Programs Offer Bilingual Teachers New Hope

In the coming weeks, congressional leaders are poised to make significant advances on proposed U.S. immigration legislation. Some of the bill's provisions would raise the cap of "high-skilled" workers allowed into the country, which could potentially raise the country's population of English learners as well.

In 2010, half of the U.S. foreign-born population was considered to have a limited English proficiency. This means they couldn't understand the language completely or had a native language other than English. While this group only accounted for 9 percent of the country's population that year, it continues to rise. This is now posing a serious question to teachers and districts across the nation: how do you effectively educate children whose primary language isn't English?

The question has led to a fervent debate in states like Texas, which has the country's second highest population of English learners. But recently, educators and administrators in the Lone Star State believe that two relatively nascent programs – dual language one-way and dual language two-way – can help to close achievement gaps that have long since been present between English learners and their White monolingual counterparts. But even with more educators rallying behind this emerging model, many districts across the state still aren't using it.

Since the 2001 school year, the number of English learners in Texas grew by 39 percent, one of the largest areas of growth in the state for "special populations." This group is pegged to grow even more in the coming decades when Hispanics become a majority minority the state. Some educators think this shift will help push dual language programs into a more prominent role.

Rep. Mike Villarreal, a democrat from San Antonio, who has authored several bills targeting the Texas' bilingual population, says that dual language programs offer English language learners, or ELLs, something entirely new.

"I don't know why more school districts don't implement more dual language programs - it's beyond me," Villarreal said. "We're talking programs that have a very long history and you can have one school district that has a dual language program or multiple dual language programs, and multiple other models of ELL students that are producing sub-par results compared to the dual language program and they're not doing anything to expand their dual language models."

These other models, including several programs hinged on English-only instruction have a deep-rooted history in the state.

A total of six certified programs, including both Dual Language models, are used in Texas schools. The most popular program used by the Texas Education Agency is the

Transitional early exit model, which focuses on first developing a student' native language and then transitioning them into English instruction within 2 to 3 years. Its partner program, transitional late exit, takes a longer period of time to transition this "special instruction" group. Other programs, like English as a Second Language pull out or English as a second language content based, work strictly on an English-only format. Together, the ESL programs have continually made up roughly 40 percent of the programs used in Texas classrooms for the past five years.

Lupe Ramos, who has taught bilingual education for 36 years in Texas, says that with more time, dual language – the model she believes to be the most effective – will overtake some of the state's longstanding programs, like ESL.

"I know that we keep hearing things, but I can see more people supporting dual language than when I started teaching years ago," Ramos said. "I can see it really sticking this time."

The dual language program first appeared in public education 51 years ago in Miami, Fla. By the 1970s, the program had spread throughout areas of the country where there was a strong presence of a second language like Spanish.

In public schools across Texas, whose border with Mexico makes up 66 percent of the entire U.S.-Mexico border, one in six children in 2012 had a native language other

than English. This means that nearly 850,000 students that year were enrolled in either bilingual education programs – classes where a student receives both native- and English-language instruction – or in classes that were based in English-only instruction. More than 90 percent of these students had Spanish as their first language.

Olivia Hernandez, the bilingual coordinator for the Austin Independent School District, one of Texas' largest urban school districts, says Austin ISD has shifted to a dual language format because it's been proven to be the most effective program available to districts.

"Dual language is the in model around the nation now, children learning two languages while they're in school," Hernandez, who oversees the bilingual programs for some 24,500 ELLs in Austin, said. "The research is showing that dual language programs – students that are in D-L programs are very successful academically and they even supersede some of the monolingual kids."

Finding the optimal ground between time teachers spend using English-heavy instruction and time where instruction is based in Spanish has proven elusive for some instructors.

Research, including a 16-year analysis of education services provided for English learners, has shown dual language to be widely beneficial, said Hernandez. According to

the study, by George Mason professor Virginia Collier and senior researcher Wayne Thomas, students sampled in Dual Language courses across the nation, including some from Houston ISD, showed significant educational gains by the sixth grade. By this level, English learners enrolled in either one-way or two-way programs were performing at or above the average reading score for native English speakers. Students enrolled in any other English-instruction program in this study never passed this mark.

Despite the research and its storied past, dual language programs aren't as widely used throughout Texas or the nation.

During the 2012 school year, the two programs made up only 21 percent and 7 percent of the total number of programs that were used to educate English learners. That number has steadily grown since 2007 when legislation was introduced that helped to spur the numbers of dual language programs. The passage of House Bill 2814 kick started a six-year pilot program to test dual language throughout a handful of Texas schools. In that time, the state's primary format for instruction largely hinged upon English immersion, which has been an implementation of the state since school districts in Texas first formed at the turn of the 19th century.

For some educators like Ramos, who helped open up one of the state's exclusively dual language campuses, English-only programs, although the oldest state-

approved model, can be the most hindering to learning a new language. Others, like Hernandez, have found the same to be true.

"You only learn to read one time in your life, right? When you push kids into the English too soon, they're struggling and they could miss that literacy piece and that's how you end up with a lot of kids not leaving the program," Hernandez said

But whether or not a district chooses to implement a dual language program depends largely on two elements: administration efforts and a district's English learner population. Since the 1970s, it's been a state requirement that when a district has more than 20 English learners in a single grade they must provide them with a bilingual education. If a district never reaches that number, schools normally use a transitional or ESL program. For Amelia Mendez, a bilingual teacher with Bean Elementary in Lubbock, the reasoning goes beyond district demographics.

"If an administrator isn't really knowledgeable on how to properly serve those students and they don't have the staffing then you can really damage a student and instead of reading a bilingual student you're creating a monolingual student that really isn't able to achieve," Mendez said.

With Hispanics slated to become a majority minority by 2020, Mendez says the landscape of bilingual education will undoubtedly change – and with that so will Texas' need for Dual Language.

Rural Schools Serve English Learners Differently

Since the 2001 school year Hispanics have made up the largest ethnic representation in Texas public schools, even surpassing their White counterparts, according to the Texas Education Agency. While they are the fastest growing population in the state, their enrollment isn't spread evenly. They've historically enrolled in the highest numbers in districts along the border and in the state's large urban centers, like Houston, Dallas or San Antonio.

But away from the Texas-Mexico border, the Hispanic population in schools is comparatively smaller. During the 2010-11 school year, in rural pockets throughout the state, some 24 districts didn't have any students that were identified as English language learners.

And many more, like Seymour Elementary in Baylor County, had a relatively small English learner population but not a large enough one to warrant bilingual education. That's because if a district's English learner population is less than 20 students, then by state law they're not required to offer bilingual education.

Seymour, which only had about 44 Hispanic students in 2010, had an even smaller population of English learners – just two. In place of bilingual education, these students, and those in similar schools throughout the state, were placed in English-immersion programs – otherwise known as ESL – where instruction is entirely based in English. With Hispanics slated to become a majority minority in Texas by 2020, some rural schools will have to quickly adjust to bilingual education. Some educators don't believe they're ready.

Hernandez, who previously worked as a bilingual teacher with the Houston ISD, says that rural pockets and even urban centers around the state still need appropriate teacher training.

"The demographics are changing so we need to know how to meet the needs of our English learners," Hernandez said. "You haven't taught until the kids have learned. You have to check for understanding and that's something we always struggle with."

But others, like Kristi Exum, the principal at Seymour Elementary, say that the model and teachers her school has proper fulfill those needs.

"It is essential," Exum said via e-mail, "that LEP" – a state-used designation meaning a student is limited English proficient – "students are provided with opportunities to be academically successful, or they can mistakenly be identified as academic strugglers. ESL programs provide opportunities to identify, assess, instruct, and intervene."

Located nearly 50 miles from the Texas-Oklahoma border, Seymour ISD has a total student population less than 500. There are over 400 similar district types throughout the state – about a third of Texas' district population – some of which have an English learner population similar to Seymour Elementary.

English-immersion programs, like the one Seymour Elementary uses, have remained a staple of education in the state since the early 1900s when an English-only bill was codified into law. The legislation effectively homogenized language learning in the Lone Star State, requiring "teachers in the public free schools to conduct school work in the English language exclusively." It also prevented the use of textbooks not in English, strictly outlined which grades – if any – in which a foreign language could be taught and provided fixed "penalties" for violating the act.

The act signaled, according to some scholars, what was the slow dissipation of local, common schools, which in the late 1800s were early encouragers of bilingual education. These schools, which were supported by waves of German, Czech, Polish and

Spanish immigrants, maintained bilingual instruction and cultural education in rural Texas schools

But today, these rural schools are often dominated by English-only instruction. The bloom of English learners in rural pockets in Texas might change that.

Exum, however, says she's confident that her school will be able to handle the influx of English learners that could potentially arrive with the expected growth of the Hispanic population in the state. But with the expected shift in population, proponents of bilingual education, like Monica Valadez, say that the state will be pressed to make necessary decisions on how to educate this growing population.

"Readiness has to be gauged independently of other communities," Valadez said. "So one particular community that has kept abreast of the demographic shift, who families are, where they're coming from, what resources they bring, what the community can offer them, and has that good understanding, I think has that readiness to say okay 'what is it we can better provide for the students that are now going to be part of our school community."

Valadez, who's the program coordinator for Proyecto Maestría, a master's program at the University of Texas at Austin that focuses on bilingual education, adds that the state needs to retain its multi-layered approach to educating English learners.

In addition to providing bilingual education, an increase in the English learner population of rural districts, will also call for more certified teachers to be hired.

Schools like Seymour Elementary and others in similar rural districts will have to hire more ESL and bilingual teachers – something which part of the state is continually needing.

According to data from the educational research group the Institute for School-University Partnerships, 40 percent of bilingual teachers in Texas were "less-than-fully certified" in 2007. But certification is only part of the problem. There's also an apparent deficiency of bilingual educators in the state. During the 2012 school year, only 1 in 20 teachers were certified to teach bilingual education. That means that there were only 16,000 bilingual educators for about 850,000 English learners.

Amelia Mendez, who serves as a language proficiency assessment coordinator at Bean Elementary in Lubbock says that in urban districts like Austin the need for bilingual educators is continually met, but in rural districts and areas further from the border, bilingual teachers are continually in need.

"The possibility of finding highly qualified teachers for those positions is almost slim to none," Mendez said. "And that's where I feel like the state of Texas needs to look

at that, and they need to look at how to help these rural school districts get an appropriate program that's going to meet the needs of these kids to where they're able to perform academically with their monolingual English counterparts.

Without the proper core of teachers, Mendez said, English learners will continue to fall behind.

English Learners Falling Behind, Dropping Out at Same Rate since '01

Sitting outside the first ever "¡Adelante!" Conference, an educator-led convention on bilingual and dual language education, Mendez recalls some of the successes and hardships she's experienced as a bilingual teacher.

One English learner, Mendez remembered, enrolled in high school as a sophomore, a year before a student must pass all their literacy test requirements in order to graduate. Although the student had to be held back a year, Mendez said they were able to pass the necessary tests needed for graduation – including the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System, a test designed to measure a student's literacy.

But for Mendez, that was the rare, fortunate outcome.

"I had another one who came in her senior year. It was over and done," Mendez said. "She thought 'I wasn't able to pass my TAKS test' – the state's last iteration of high-stakes testing, "'but I'll be able to come back' and they had to pull her aside and say, 'that's not what's going to happen.' So now she becomes a dropout label, now she becomes a dropout statistic."

Such is the reality for Mendez's students, English learners and recently arrived immigrants throughout Texas.

For the last decade, despite graduating at a higher percentage than in previous years, students with a limited English proficiency have remained, on average, four times as likely to drop out compared to their White counterparts, according to data from the Texas Education Agency. Emilio Zamora, a professor of Mexican-American history at the University of Texas at Austin, points to the state's lack of dual language programs in high schools as the part of the reason. By the secondary level the number of programs used to teach English learners is overwhelmingly English-only. During the last school year, more than 95 percent of programs used in high school were based on ESL models, which means that no native language instruction is given.

"The primary purpose of those bilingual programs is to communicate to the public that the schools, particularly in our state are interested in helping the children," Zamora said. "But when you look at the actual workings of the bilingual education it doesn't

work that way. The children often times are not prepared to make the transition and they fail, or they get discouraged and fail and drop out of school."

The state has long since attempted to redress such inequities. In 1973, Gov. Dolph Briscoe signed into law Senate Bill 121, otherwise known as the Bilingual Education and Training Act. Made law during the 63rd Texas legislature, the bill served as an unprecedented turning point in education for English learners, overturning 50-year-old English-only teaching requirements imposed by state laws. More recently, the state has also implemented the use of a literacy assessment system to measure a student's readiness to exit their bilingual or ESL program. At yet another level of accountability, the state – under the Texas Administrative code – requires that each bilingual campus require a language proficiency assessment committee to monitor and assess English learners on an individual basis.

But despite this multi-tiered approach, campuses and districts still aren't held as accountable as they should be, according to San Antonio representative Mike Villarreal.

Villarreal, a democrat, has just introduced a bill to the Texas legislature that would change all that. House Bill 1328 would improve the ability of the state to evaluate programs like dual language and ESL. It would also strengthen the ability of TEA to intervene when a school isn't properly educating English learners. Villarreal says that his bill, which is estimated to cost the state $1.8 million over the next two years, will

properly track for the first time how non-native English speakers do versus non-English language learners, who are often called ELLs.

"We might see that only 61 percent of ELL students at a certain grade are passing their math standards, but in actuality those students going through a particular program have experienced tremendous growth over the year and they may not cross the specific threshold that the state has set as a definition of minimum standards but they may have actually covered a lot of ground over the year," Villarreal said.

Villarreal said that it would help pinpoint an area where a student has made the most advances and areas where they're struggling the most.

It's a system like this that could've better helped the latecomers to Mendez' campus in Lubbock.

Gomez-Gomez Enrichment Model Promising, but Unused

Tucked away in Southeast Austin, Texas is the newly built Perez Elementary, a long concrete-grey school with intermittent blocks of redbrick.

From the corners of the school's playground to the ergonomic desks that fill each classroom, students can be heard uttering phrases of Spanish. On one unseasonably warm

day at the school this March, one student cried out "¿Dónde están?" as they looked for their classmates at the playground. Hearing brief phrases of Spanish around Perez isn't all that uncommon.

That's because Perez has a robust Hispanic population. During the 2010 school year, of the nearly 800 students at the school, more than 86 percent identified as Hispanic. But that should come as no surprise in Texas since Hispanics have made up the largest ethnic representation in the state's public schools for more than a decade.

While there are hundreds of similar elementary schools throughout the state, one factor separates Perez from the majority of them: The school is one of a handful of campuses in the state that's using Gomez-Gomez, a specific instruction model for administering dual language services to the school's English learning population.

The school's bilingual coordinator Lupe Ramos says the enrichment model helps students to learn English in a more natural environment.

"This particular Gomez-Gomez model guides us on how to work with the children, to work with the partners, to help each other, and to really support," Ramos said, adding that the enrichment model "really helps the children understand that they don't need to feel bad about making a mistake, their partner is going to help them in writing or oral language, or in any aspect of a second language."

And so far, Ramos said, it's been working.

The school, which opened its doors in 2006 as a dual-language campus has excelled academically over the past 3 years. The schools English learner population has scored on par with its monolingual students as well.

Perez is currently one of the 66 schools in the Austin Independent School District that offers dual language, a program many educators believe to be the solution for low performance among English language learners. Austin ISD is also the only district in Texas to make use of the Gomez-Gomez model in all of its campuses.

The majority of other schools in the state rely heavily on what educators call a "90-10" or a "50-50" instructional method for teaching dual language. In a classes that use the "90-10" model, 90 percent of instruction is delivered in English and the other portion in a student's native language. Teachers gradually increase native-language instruction until a balanced level is reached by either the fifth or sixth grade. In a "50-50" model instruction is given in an equal amount of time, from when a child is first enrolled to when they exit the program several years later. Reyna Torres, an elementary school with Bean Elementary in Lubbock, Texas, says that before a school elects an instructional program, they need to properly determine which enrichment model could best serve their English learners.

"If an administrator isn't really knowledgeable on how to properly serve those students and they don't have the staffing then you can really damage a student and instead of creating a bilingual student you're creating a monolingual student that really isn't able to achieve," Torres said. "When you have really good programs, like you know, your dual language 90-10 models that are implemented correctly, or your Gomez and Gomez models then you're able to close the achievement gaps there because you're helping the kid in their native language."

The Gomez-Gomez model, which is used in 4 other states throughout the country, has received mild success since its inception in 1995. Although it's gained most of its notoriety in Texas campuses, it still has yet to be widely subscribed to by all Texas districts and campuses. Of the roughly 8,500 schools in Texas only about 7 percent make use of the model. The model requires that students be partnered, preferably an English learner with a native English speaker.

Lupe Ramos, a kindergarten teacher who uses the instructional model in her dual language class, says that part of what makes the Gomez-Gomez model so appealing is that it "focuses on illuminating the achievement gaps that exist even at this low in the grade levels" and creates a natural setting for the students.

The more ‘natural’ setting Ramos refers to is a room covered in instructional notes. The hallways that lead to her kindergarten class are covered in them, too.

“Keep two squares from the wall. Look forward” reads one sign, with a clear air of reprimand. To the right is the same message but in Spanish. “Parar dos cuadros lejos de la pared. Mirar adelante.”

Bilingual labels are just one of the recommendations for schools to help facilitate learning English. Another requirement is that schools implement a “language of the day.” Three days out of the week, Perez elementary speak primarily in Spanish. A sign at the front desk reminds students.

For seven-year-old Emily Poilio, a first grader at the school, the design of a Gomez-Gomez dual language class, especially the labels found in the classroom, has helped her to pick up Spanish with ease.

“Well, they’ve been labeling everything, they even labeled the clocks and the walls,” Polio said, as she happily points to a window with the words “la ventana” on it as an example of a words she’s learned. “So they’ve been labeling all this to help the kids to learn more about the Spanish.”

This renewed approach has given Austin ISD new impetus, says Ramos. The district, which now uses dual language two-way in more than 60 percent of its elementary schools, uses the Gomez-Gomez enrichment philosophy throughout all of its bilingual campuses.

At the end of the day, students from Ramos class lined up and prepared to file out to the front of the school to catch their bus. As they walked out the door, they cried goodbye in both English and in Spanish. “Goodbye!” and “¡Adios!”

As she guides her students out the door, Ramos remembers that the educational landscape has change greatly from when she first started teaching.

“My role is totally different and that’s what we need in the classrooms,” Ramos said. “We cannot continue to do the same old-fashioned classroom, where the teacher’s in the front and just talking, talking all the time.”

Appendix 1: Audio Stories

My report also contained two audio stories about bilingual education in Texas.

1. “Accountability for Bilingual Programs”
2. “Labeling English Learners in Texas Schools”

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